DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 985 JC 020 602

AUTHOR	Peterson, Kimberly
TITLE	Welfare-to-Work Programs: Strategies for Success. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, Los Angeles, CA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-JC-02-04
PUB DATE	2002-04-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0010
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges. University of California at Los Angeles, 3051 Moore Hall, P.O. Box 951521, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1524. Tel: 310-825-3931. For full text: http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/ERIC/eric.html.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	College Role; *Community Colleges; *Education Work Relationship; Employment; *Job Training; Two Year Colleges; *Welfare Recipients; Welfare Reform; *Welfare Services; Work Experience Programs
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Personal Responsibility and Work Opp Recon Act; *Welfare to Work Programs

ABSTRACT

This digest examines community college welfare-to-work programs and the strategies employed to enhance program completion, job retention, and educational advancement. It begins with a discussion of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, and the implications of this "work-first" oriented legislation for welfare recipients and community colleges. Two common barriers to completing welfare-to-work programs are presented (i.e., difficulty balancing work and school and the lack of reliable transportation/child care) along with strategies for overcoming these obstacles, such as programs that offer on-site childcare or that loan participants computers so they can access distance education courses from home. Strategies that facilitate job retention include pre-employment training on workplace development skills and the establishment of mentoring relationships that offer participants ongoing support. With respect to promoting the educational advancement of welfare recipients, the digest identifies two possible strategies. The first is the establishment of fully articulated welfare-to-work programs that facilitate the completion of associate's degrees. The second strategy concerns the creation of an academic culture that encourages participants to view themselves as students rather than welfare recipients. One specific example of this strategy is a program that requires all participants to obtain college IDs and complete admissions applications. (Contains 12 references.) (RC)

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Kimberly Peterson

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Digest

April, 2002 EDO-JC-02-04

Welfare-To-Work Programs: Strategies for Success

By Kimberly Peterson

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 has significantly altered the role of community colleges in welfare-related education and training. Welfare reform now limits the time that welfare recipients can collect benefits, and puts strong pressures on them to find employment. PRWORA's work-first focus has led most community colleges to adopt shorter-term training programs that emphasize rapid employment (Szelenyi). Though studies have established that these work-first focused programs speed up welfare recipients' entry into the labor market, they usually do not lead to jobs that are long lasting or well paying (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton). Community college welfare-to-work programs today face two often-conflicting goals: helping welfare recipients quickly obtain employment and helping welfare recipients obtain the education necessary to gain the types of employment opportunities that lead to permanent economic self-sufficiency.

This Digest, drawn from "The Community College Role in Welfare to Work" (New Directions for Community Colleges, Winter 2001), focuses on how community college welfare-to-work programs can assist welfare recipients in overcoming barriers to success, emphasizing especially the strategies that welfare-to-work programs have implemented to enhance program completion, job retention, and educational advancement.

Overcoming Program Completion Barriers

Participants in welfare-to-work programs often come from backgrounds already beset with crises. Any further disruptions to their lives can cause them to quickly abandon plans for education and employment (Paganette & Kozell). A study of welfare recipients prior to PRWORA found that juggling work, school, and family responsibilities were all barriers to completing college degrees or certificate programs (Qunit, Musick, & Lander, 1994 as reported in Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton). Community colleges, in collaboration with the Department of Human Services (DHS) and other community service agencies, can work to discern potential conflicts and assist clients in overcoming these barriers to successful program completion.

Balancing Work and School

PRWORA's work requirements pressure many welfare recipients into working at least part-time while participating in welfare-to-work educational programs (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton). Participants often experience conflicts between employer and classroom demands, therefore flexible scheduling can better enable participants to successfully balance work and school (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton). Structuring courses in a modularized, open-entry, open-exit format allows participants to advance at their own pace. Most importantly, this type of course structure gives students the option of reenrolling, without having to repeat entire semester-long courses, if employment or other circumstances cause them to leave prior to course completion. Another approach is to provide on-campus internship and work-study opportunities that fulfill PRWORA's work requirements, thus diminishing the conflicts between work and school (Szelenyi).

Child Care and Transportation

Many welfare recipients lack reliable sources of childcare and transportation, thus hampering regular attendance at work and school. Collaboration with DHS, and government and community service agencies, as well as private sources, can provide necessary funds to finance child care and transportation assistance programs such as gas and car repair vouchers and subsidized bus passes (Higgins, Mayne, Deacon, & LaComb; Pampe). Additionally, community colleges can improve access to childcare by providing these services on-site. Some welfare-to-work programs have used funds to bring classes directly to the participants by loaning them computers for participation in online community college courses, thus alleviating both child care and transportation problems (Pampe). Welfare-to-work programs can also train participants for specific jobs in which they can legitimately work and earn money from home. Such an approach is taken by El Paso Community College's (Texas) child development associate credential training program for welfare recipients (Bombach). Graduates of this program obtain the necessary certification to legally offer childcare services from their own homes.

Enhancing Job Retention

An important objective of helping welfare recipients attain economic self-sufficiency is not just becoming employed, but maintaining employment (Ream, Wagner, & Knorr). Many of the barriers to success faced by welfare recipients during educational programs persist into the workplace. Additionally, the recipients may encounter new challenges that they are ill equipped to face while on the job. These issues can be overcome and prevented through proper pre-employment training and resources that aid welfare-to-work program graduates during employment.

Workplace Skills Training

To aid in job retention, some welfare-to-work programs have chosen to place a major emphasis on teaching acceptable and expected workplace behaviors – skills that participants may not need to obtain a job, but will need to maintain employment (Ream, Wagner, & Knorr). Corporate partners of

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the Moraine Park Technical College (Wisconsin) welfare-to-work program identified seven critical skills behaviors for welfare-to-work students: "work productively, work cooperatively, communicate clearly, learn effectively, act responsibly, value self positively, and think critically and creatively" (Nitschke, p. 44). Employers have indicated that a lack of these essential workplace skills is a guarantee for employee failure (Nitschke). Programs that focus on developing workplace skills such as communication, interpersonal behavior, teamwork, and problem solving abilities can greatly aid job retention efforts.

Monitoring and Mentoring

Through monitoring and mentoring efforts, potential barriers to job retention can be identified and confronted quickly before they result in job loss. Community colleges can monitor graduates' progress in the workplace by employing mail and telephone surveys and workplace visits by instructors (Ream, Wagner, & Knorr). Programs can also monitor graduates in partnership with other service agencies and organizations. When its welfare-to-work participants attain employment, the Community College of Aurora (Colorado) transfers them to the Goodwill Industries' Job Success Program. This Goodwill program tracks and monitors participants for two years and helps them obtain additional support services and funds (Higgins). Additionally, employers can take part in the job retention effort by providing on-site job mentors and coaches to their employees. Development of such a job mentoring program for graduates of the Oakland Community College (Michigan) welfare-to-work program has resulted in corporate partners reporting improvements in employment retention (Pagenette & Kozell; Pampe).

Promoting Educational Advancement

Given the pressures and incentives for welfare recipients to find work, it may not be feasible for them to earn degrees and certificates in the short term. Studies, however, indicate that welfare recipients are most likely to achieve financial self-sufficiency by earning a college degree (Higgins). Additionally, findings from the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies suggest that obtaining a GED, and especially obtaining a GED and some postsecondary training, can result in significant employment earnings gains (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton). The challenge for community colleges is to structure their welfare-to-work programs in ways that allow former welfare recipients to return and gain such credentials in the future.

Credits and Articulation

Through the establishment of fully articulated welfare-to-work programs, credits can then be used towards completion of associate's degrees or certificate programs at the community college, and eventually bachelor's degrees programs at the college or university level (Pagenette & Kozell; Bombach). Some community colleges have worked to further the granting of program credits by securing the ability to grant partial credits and credits for outside-of-classroom experiences such as work internships (Nitschke; Higgins).

Encouragement to Return

The atmosphere of a community college campus can encourage participants to envision themselves as part of an educational environment. The El Paso Community College (Texas) welfare-to-work program requires participants to obtain college ID cards and attend sessions where they fill out financial aid forms and applications for admission – actions that can help program participants to define themselves as college students, not welfare clients (Bombach). Additionally, instructors, program coordinators, and guest speakers repeatedly inform program participants that the credits they receive can be applied toward educational degree or certificate programs, and they encourage participants to continue their education and take advantage of the credits they have received (Bombach). Approximately half of the participants in this program choose to enroll at the college for further education immediately after program completion. Other community college programs have established scholarship funds to encourage welfare-to-work program graduates to return to school (Pagenette & Kozell).

Conclusion

Community college welfare-to-work programs are engaged in a variety of efforts to assist welfare recipients to move off welfare and into economic self-sufficiency. Successful efforts take into account the unique barriers that welfare recipients face – barriers that can prevent success both at work and at school. An understanding of the issues and pressures faced by welfare recipients will contribute to the development of welfare-to-work programs that facilitate not just job attainment, but also job retention and educational advancement – all of which are important steps toward the ultimate goal of permanent economic self-sufficiency.

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0010. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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